

RECOGNISING OUR HISTORY AND STORY

Sermon delivered by the Rt Rev Dr Peter Stuart, the Assistant Bishop of Newcastle on the occasion of the celebration of 175th anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone of St James Morpeth, NSW.

I understand from the Rector that this 175th anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone of St James almost caught people a bit by surprise! In some ways it is something of a dress rehearsal for some celebrations to come in December 2015 when the celebrations will be on in earnest to mark the 175th anniversary of its consecration by Bishop Broughton. Both the laying of the foundation stone and consecration occurred when most modern Australians are having a break! But that was not the way back then! It is differences like that which excite sociologists and historians – we get insights into our changing culture!

I am pleased to be here and celebrate with you. This occasion provides us with an opportunity to reflect on our history – recognising that the Christian people of God have a two thousand year history and a story that spreads across the continents of the planet. Our 175 years is a small part of that great heritage yet this celebration reminds each of us that Christian witness and celebration began before us and will continue after us. We are stewards of the great treasure of faith which has been entrusted to us; a treasure which this building and this congregation exists to serve. We gather as fellow citizens of the kingdom who cherish the good news of all that God has done. God has called us to be his people – his household. A people who, building on the on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, know that Jesus Christ is the one who supports and sustains us. He is our foundation. In him we find holiness and discover God dwelling among usⁱ.

In this beautiful place, which has been a spiritual home to so many, I want to reflect on its history from a couple of angles.

The first is a very familiar oneⁱⁱ. The much told story is that Edward Close, while serving in the Peninsular Wars and fearing for his life in the heat of battle, promised God that he would build a church if he survived. Nearly 30 years later, having been given substantial land grants, he was in a position to fulfil his vow. Close was a product of his time; a military gentleman who served as a magistrate and a member of the legislative council. He seems to have taken to heart the image of English squire accepting responsibility for convicts, staff and tenants for who lived or worked at Illulaung, Green Hills or as it was later known Morpeth. He was behind the establishment of a local school, was the first President of the Maitland Hospital and here we stand to celebrate the gift of this beautiful building, which though modified over time, serves as a testament to Close's commitment to God and care for the educational, health and spiritual welfare of the people of this village.

The accounts of Close speak of a good man who made the best of the opportunities and accepted numerous responsibilities that came his way in the new colony. He demonstrated personal support for Tyrrell as the new Bishop of Newcastle enabling him to use Morpeth as the base for his extensive and demanding Diocese.

One of the ways we can give thanks to God today for the founding of this Church is to remember Edward Close and ponder the manner in which our lives honour what we say with our lips. To know that our blessing and bounty comes from God and to reflect this as citizens of the Kingdom in the way we live.

The second approach to history that I am taking this morning is one that I find challenging and confronting.

This approach begins by recognising that for some people this building and this celebration might represent a stumbling block. The people for whom this may be of most concern are the first peoples of this land. The Morpeth-Maitland area seems to have been a meeting place for Awabakal, Worimi, Gringai, Wonnarua and Darkinung peoples.

James Wilson-Miller a direct descendant of the Gringai Clan and Wonnarua nation speaks of the settlement of the Hunter Valley as one in which his people ‘experienced the armed force of the British Empire as European frontiers pushed into Wonnarua lands.’ⁱⁱⁱ The land grant given to Close and his ultimate economic success is a consequence of that movement.

The settlement of Morpeth and the building of this church occurred at a time when the confrontation between colonial authorities and aboriginal nations was very fierce in places like the Murrumbidgee. This was not a peaceful time. Wilson-Miller points out that from 1726 – 1826, Britain was at war on seven occasions in Europe and the Americas. Many of the colonial leaders had been military men who had served in and been shaped by these conflicts. But the aggression between peoples was not the main cause of death – new diseases came to country and lands that had been used to sustain people by providing home for kangaroos, emus and other wildlife were being taken over. We are more familiar with the history that tells us this was a tough time for the colonists but we are growing in our awareness of the impact on the peoples who were here before us. Wilson-Miller urges that this story must be told asserting that ‘The truth telling of our history is a key to enhancing the soul and heart of our very nation.’

My own journey into a deeper understanding of these things began when I was in Tasmania. I first went there in 1974 as a grade 6 school boy. In 1976 the remains of a Tasmanian aboriginal woman named Truganini were cremated 100 years after her death. The media publicity at the time was that the remains of the last Tasmanian aboriginal were, finally, being appropriately treated. Around 20 years later as a member of the clergy this myth was convincingly shattered for all who were present at a clergy school in Launceston where we were taken by some Tasmanian aboriginal people through their tale. A few years later a very helpful book by James Boyce^{iv}, sponsored by Anglicare Tasmania, looked at the involvement of Anglicans in the events leading to the suppression and oppression of Tasmanian Aboriginal people. There was nothing to suggest direct aggression by Anglicans but it was made clear that the fortunes of that colony and its main Church were intertwined. The history we reflect on today comes from the same period.

Another way we can give thanks to God today for the founding of this Church is to know the fullness of the story and ponder the implications as we seek to honour God with our lips and our lives. To paraphrase, the truth telling of our history is a key to enhancing the soul and heart of our Church.

No people whether the first people of this land or later comers are meant to be foreigners or strangers. We are invited and called to be fellow citizens, God’s people and members of God’s community^v. As we live this out in our own age we must come to terms with the fact that many of our forebears were slow to understand the first peoples as equally created in God’s sight and worthy of dignity and respect. In our time we have been growing into a deeper understanding.

It is appropriate for us to think about these things here in Morpeth. One of its famous former Rectors – AP Elkin – was at the forefront of white learning about the impact of white people on aboriginal people. Some of his conclusions, in terms of assimilation, would not and should not be accepted today, but his passion to see proper treatment, justice and citizenship for the first peoples was fashioned in the crucible of Maitland, Wollombi and Morpeth^{vi}.

We can see in some of Elkin's work an understanding of interrelationship shaped by his Christian faith. In Christ people are joined together and become the means through which God and God's purposes for all creation are made known and celebrated^{vii}. Christians have a significant contribution to make to this conversation but they must also be very much aware of the impact of some of the contributions they and their forebears have made in the past.

The deep journey of reconciliation is the profound movement of coming together in heart and mind. In our time it must begin with a deep and proper listening to the stories of the past and present that we might be familiar with them and understand their implications today. It involves listening to the people most affected and discovering together what the next steps might be. The Synod last year asked every parish to engage in a process of listening to the aboriginal peoples of its area. I really encourage this upon you. I suspect for most us it will be a journey of challenge and grace.

I am deeply thankful for the faith that inspired Edward Close and for what he has done in response to that faith by erecting this building. He honoured with his life what he professed with his lips. We cherish his gift in this generation and commit ourselves to be a good steward of it for the next. As we do, we can also reflect on the bigger picture of which he was a part and discern in that what might need our prayer and attention.

My hope and prayer is that as we make this journey of faithful reflection and action in our time we will be shaped by God and grow as his missionary people – the means by which his love, his compassion, his forgiveness, his hope and his peace are known in this and every generation.

ⁱ See Ephesians 2: 19 - 22

ⁱⁱ Gray, Nancy (1966) 'Close, Edward Charles (1790–1866)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/close-edward-charles-1905/text2255>

ⁱⁱⁱ Wilson-Miller, James (2005) Conflict in the Valley: The Triumph of the Wonnarua, AARE <http://www.aare.edu.au/05pap/wil05317.pdf>

^{iv} Boyce, James (2001) God's Own Country, Anglicare-Tasmania.

^v See Ephesians 2: 19

^{vi} Wise, Tigger (1996) 'Elkin, Adolphus Peter (1891–1979)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/elkin-adolphus-peter-10109/text17845>

^{vii} See Ephesians 2: 21